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Program offers MCI-H inmates "Alternatives to Violence"  
By HEATHER KEELS (heather.keels@herald-mail.com)

"Alternatives to Violence" Facilitator "Wise Walker" Vincent gave a history of the program Tuesday night during a banquet at Maryland Correctional Institution-Hagerstown.

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HAGERSTOWN — When inmates at the Maryland Correctional Institution-Hagerstown arrive for a voluntary three-day program called "Alternatives to Violence," most of them walk in wearing an invisible mask of hardness and aggression, said Warren Rymes, an inmate serving a life sentence who serves as a peer facilitator in the program.

But over three intense days of exercises that build trust and self-esteem, that begins to change.

"The mask comes off when they feel there's a level of trust in the room," Rymes said. "It's the pressure that is relieved of having to be tough."

That's the theory behind the Alternatives to Violence Program, which was developed by Quakers in 1975 in a prison in New York state and brought to MCI-H after a 1991 riot. The program recognized its 35 peer facilitators and 16 volunteer community facilitators Tuesday night at an "Appreciation Night" in the facility.

Over its 17 years at MCI-H, the program has held more than 138 basic workshops and 68 advanced workshops, as well as four "training for trainers" sessions for peer facilitators, according to inmate and facilitator Walker Vincent. The most recent training for trainers session graduated 19 new facilitators this spring, Vincent said.

One of the first exercises is for each participant to give himself a positive adjective nickname, such as "Wonderful Warren" or "Wise Walker."

"When you give yourself a positive adjective, you're responsible to live up to it," Rymes explained.

One inmate said he chose to call himself "Kinder Kevin" because he felt he needed to work on being kinder to others after a childhood that taught him only aggression.

"My dad told me, 'If you don't beat this person up, I'm gonna beat you up,'" "Kinder Kevin" recalled. "That's just the way it was in my household."



One exercise that had a profound effect on Kevin was a challenge to answer the question "Who am I?" 10 times.

"When I first did the exercise, they were all negative," Kevin said. He resolved to leave all of those things behind, keeping only the one thing he liked about himself - that he liked to draw.

"Now I have a whole list of things I like," "Kinder Kevin" said.

Other exercises revolve around collaboration, such as trying to solve a problem without talking, said David Hutchins, Vice President of the Community Correctional Services Committee, the umbrella organization that supports AVP.

With the help of weekly support groups, inmates apply the problem-solving skills they learn in the program to life in the institution, and, eventually, outside, Rymes said.

"We're not just in here doing time," he said. "The guys that come in here are changing their lives."

## **Comments**

**posted by refract**, July 9, 2008 09:28 AM –

**I know three of the volunteer unsung heros helping with the Alternatives to Violence Program. They tell wonderful stories of helping really tough inmates take the first steps toward a productive life. Perhaps one of your reporters could interview the volunteers as a group and write a series of articles highlighting how these volunteers are making life better for us all.**

